

EPIPHANY 5 2024 TG **SIMON'S MOTHER-IN-LAW: A HEALING CLUE.** dtw

The Gospel: Mark 1.29-39

When the writer of Mark wanted to say something strong about the implications of Jesus' ministry, he really didn't pull any punches. Mark gets straight into it. In the first two and a half chapters there are no less than seven separate accounts of individual healings, and more accounts of multiple healings. As far as Mark is concerned the Gospel, 'the good news of Jesus Christ'. (Mk1.1) *is* Healing. In today's gospel snippet alone, Simon's mother-in-law gets healed, heaps of people who are sick and demon-possessed get cured and 'everyone is searching' for Jesus, to be made whole. How wonderful that we have healing ministry Sunday by Sunday in this church, and I know it is valued by so many.

But I want to take a look at an even smaller snippet of today's Gospel that could easily slip our attention: Simon's mother-in-law. He had a genuine mother-in-law did Simon, who would be called Peter. As I thought about that, a song came to mind from my childhood days - a song called *Mother-in-law* - the words weren't exactly positive! My relationship with Judith, Deborah's aging mother, is good, and it seems that Peter liked his mother-in-law enough to get Jesus to lift her up from her bed and see her healed of a fever. However, the big secret that Mark gives away here is that if Peter had a mother-in-law, then he was married! Now, she doesn't even crack a mention does Peter's wife (We read little about any of the disciples' relationships in a patriarchal age). Imagine being married to Peter. Simon Peter – impetuous, fool-hardy, boastful Simon Peter – who became the rock-man, the strong reliable man with a mission – the one upon whose confession the apostolic church would be built – a church against which the very gates of hell could not prevail. Saint Peter...Simon bar Jona – son of John...Peter Johnson he'd be called today. But what about Mrs Johnson? We don't read a word. And we often don't hear a word about a variety of people who stand by us in life, do we? - be they friends, lovers, supporters, carers.

So, I want to focus on the woman in Peter's life today and all the people she represents. I want to imagine her lot in life, and I want you to as well. What kind of woman was Peter's wife? Well, she probably sold fish to start with – at least until her husband met a man called Jesus who talked about fishing for *people* instead. Did Peter even go home to her that very first day and tell her about this man who found him by the Sea of Galilee? Peter, holding down a daytime job, bringing home the bacon so to speak – well, the mackerel at least. How did she react to such a crazy idea? – leaving everything to traipse around Galilee and Jerusalem after that man Jesus from Nazareth? Could anything good come out of Nazareth anyway?

But she stood by her man – there was something different in Peter's eyes the day he did turn up and have a meal with her. She could see it- her mother could see it too. Let's face it, mothers-in-law can usually be more critical of potentially wayward sons-in-law than their own daughters who happen to be married to the rogues. No, this was different. He would leave her quite incredulous long into the night about what this Jesus said, the people that he touched and healed, the joy that he brought to people's pain, the peace that passed all understanding. He would beg her to let him hang in there with this Jesus – they were getting by somehow – there was always a meal on the table- and Peter would somehow get supplies and fish through to his family, by hook or by crook. "Darling, just please let me follow him again tomorrow...please."

And I can imagine her consternation the day that he came home with his tail between his legs. "The master asked us, "Who do people say that I am?" and I was the one who got it right! I told him that he was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! And he told me that I was blessed! But within moments he told us that he would have to suffer and die and I said "God forbid, Lord, this must never happen to you!" and he said, "Get behind me Satan!". She

would calm his troubled brow and stroke his thick ginger hair. O yes, she could have foreseen that interchange with the Lord. This woman prayed for Peter; she yearned for Peter; she knew the kind of man that Peter was, better than he knew himself. It prepared her for that darkest day when he came home sobbing bitter tears when his whole world had collapsed around him. He confessed to her, "I cannot understand how I did that and how he knew – the master already knew before I denied him, that I would". Even at this lowest point in his life, his darkest hour, she stood by this man.

Her mother had long since moved in with her because they were too afraid of the authorities and Peter had been away so much for so long – times were very dangerous. Two days after the crucifixion was it Peter's wife who encouraged him to go out and see if he could find the others? "Peter, try and pull yourselves together – Jesus would have wanted that." And so it was that Peter and John and the others had their lives transformed beyond their wildest dreams when they encountered their risen Lord and master. Peter went on to become a great missionary saint and almost certainly went to his own cross. And for this we give God the glory and praise.

But today I want us to give special thanks for the often-silent partners of this world – the quiet achievers – the constant pray-ers – the watchful supporters who rarely crack a mention. You don't see them in the Australia Day honours, but let's give thanks for those who stand by us, who pray and support with every decision we make even if they disagree sometimes – who are there in good times and bad – the levellers – those who keep their cool while we are losing ours – those who refocus us and get us back on track with a purpose, a future and a hope. Those who sometimes feel the pain of our disappointment more than they may make out and those who shed quiet tears of pride and joy when we have achieved, when we have strived and accomplished. Our partners in life; yes, the men too. Single people too. Same-sex partners too. Anyone who is 'there for you' as the lovely saying goes.

I might be having a celebration here shortly, but I give thanks for the woman who has stood by me now for 48 years – we have our anniversary this week. I can think of a night as a young army chaplain here in Adelaide when I was called out to a violent domestic at Smithfield Plains at 2am and all she could do was pray until dawn when I returned (no mobile phones back then). Or when I took the funeral of a young woman who had taken her own life and found it so hard what to say to the family. Or when I rolled the car on a rough gravel Frankland-Mt Barker Rd in Bunbury Diocese, when looking after a neighbouring parish as well as my own, and nearly killed us both in the rush. Or when flying to the other side of this big country to explore a calling; Deborah praying that I would know God's will. Sharing me day after day with lots of people, demands and crises – living the goldfish bowl existence that rectory life can often be. Or when I was feeling burnt-out in ministry, feeling that I had nothing more to give: Her just being there, loving, holding on, solid as a rock. Yes, and I'll bet that Peter's woman was the *real* rock behind the Rock.

Think about those who stand by you – husband, wife, companion, friend, brother, sister, the 'rocks'. And thank God. If Simon's mother-in-law had never had a fever this sermon would have been different. It might have been more about healing. But right now, she provides a pretty wholesome focus for me. I hope she does for you too.